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Salvation and the Church: An Agreed Statement by the Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, Church House Publishing/Catholic Truth Society, 1987, 29 pp. 65p. ISBN 0 7151 4760 9

The doctrine of justification by faith has widely been held to be of major importance in ecumenical debates between Roman Catholics and Protestants. In 1983, the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue Group in the United States published the statement *Justification by Faith,*[1] a substantial and extensively researched document noting a 'fundamental consensus on the gospel' (p 299). This document, whose conclusions are still being evaluated, represents a major landmark in the present ecumenical discussion on justification. *Salvation and the Church,* the first Statement to have been produced by the Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC II), reproduces much of the general conclusions of this work, while adding a section on 'The Church and Salvation'. The Statement goes some considerable way towards justifying both the evangelical concern for the doctrine of justifiction by faith, as well as seeming to endorse contemporary evangelical Anglican approaches to it.

It is impossible to give a detailed analysis of this agreed statement in the limited space possible within this review. The present reviewer will shortly be publishing a response to this document, examining its historical and theological foundations in some detail.[2] The present review is intended to be a preliminary response to the statement, and indicate how Evangelical Anglicans might respond to it.

First, we must ask just how important the doctrine of justification by faith was to the historical development of the Church of England. Although it is unquestionably true that the question of justification dominated the concerns of Martin Luther, and the Lutheran Reformation after him, this concern was not shared by Reformed theologians (such as Zwingli, Bucer and Calvin). For the early Reformed theologians, the agenda set for the Reformation was the reform of the doctrine, morals and institutions of the Church (and, if possible, the state) along biblical lines. Although the doctrine of justification by faith was seen as one aspect of this programme of reform, it was not assigned a position of priority: indeed, several Reformed theologians regarded Luther's preoccupation with the doctrine as hopelessly subjective. Although there is evidence for Lutheran influence upon the early phases of the English Reformation, the Elizabethan Settlement witnessed Reformed theological influence gaining the ascendancy. Unlike the Lutheran church, therefore, it is necessary to point out that the birth of the Church of England is not linked directly with the doctrine of justification. Agreement upon the doctrine of justification by faith, therefore, would not amount to the removal of the chief obstacle to reunion between the two communions.

Second, we may ask what the differences between Protestants and Roman Catholics over the doctrine at the time of the Reformation were. Broadly speaking, these may be divided into two categories: *misunderstandings* (where both sides were saying much the same thing, although this was not realized at the time) and *disagreements* (where real points of difference were at issue). The Statement notes a number of difficulties which arose in the course of the sixteenth century debates on

1 'Justification by Faith', *Origins* 13/17, 1983, pp 277-304. For further background see H. G. Anderson, T. A. Murphy and John A. Burgess, eds., *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII, Augsburg,* Minneapolis 1985.

2 *ARCIC II and Justification: An Evangelical Anglican Assessment of 'Salvation and the Church',* Latimer Study 26; forthcoming (June 1987), Latimer House, Oxford.

the question of justification. Four difficulties are singled out in particular; nature of faith; the precise meaning of the term 'justification'; the relation of good works to salvation; the role of the Church in salvation. Each of these is discussed briefly. It is shown that both communions are agreed that 'even the very first movements which lead to justification, such as repentance, the desire for forgiveness and even faith itself, are the work of God' (§24); that justification is an unmerited gift of God; that our justification leads to our recreation and hence to good works as the fruit of our new freedom in Christ (§19); and that justification involves being incorporated into the community of the Church (§25), rather than a solitary life of faith. This is a useful summary of the main points of agreement between Roman Catholics and Protestants in the sixteenth century – agreement often obscured through controversy and misunderstanding (not least, as the Statement correctly notes, on account of the different Protestant and Roman Catholic understandings of the concept of 'justification' itself). However, the Statement really does little more than clarify the *misunderstandings* of the sixteenth century – where *real points of difference* are involved, the Statement appears reluctant to engage with them.

For Richard Hooker, the 'grand question which hangeth yet in controversy between us and the Church of Rome' concerned the nature of justifying righteousness and the formal cause of justification. Indeed, the historical course of the debates at the Council of Trent, and the Protestant-Roman Catholic polemical exchanges preceding and following Trent, point to this question as being perceived as of central importance. This, and certain other historical difficulties, seem to be noted by the Statement (eg, §5), only to be addressed rather circumspectly. It is far from clear whether we are to regard such matters as having been *resolved*, or having been declared to be *irrelevant*, by ARCIC II. The impression gained is that they are being quietly marginalized. This reluctance to grasp this nettle is perhaps understandable – but a critic of the Statement can immediately claim that it has done nothing more than recapitulate what *was* agreed in the sixteenth century, without engaging seriously with the real issues of disagreement. After all, such a critic will point out, it is easy to reach agreement if the real points of difference are not addressed.

The Statement then plays into the hands of such a critic in its section on 'The Church and Salvation' (§§25-31), easily the most inadequate part of the Statement, and which gives every indication of simply not being ready for publication. The entire discussion of the bearing of the doctrine upon the life of the Church – the *practical* questions, which so aroused the Reformers – is abstract and unfocused. Crucial questions of practical church life – such as indulgences (not mentioned, despite its pivotal role in the initiation of the Lutheran Reformation!); of the role of the priest in confession (glossed over with a theological platitude in §22); of the role of infant baptism in relation to justification – are not addressed with the seriousness which they so obviously demand. It is at this level that the real, the obvious and tangible, differences emerge – but we are left with the distinct impression that ARCIC II does not wish to address them. Why, it may reasonably be asked, could not at least *some* attention have been given to the question of what was historically at stake in the indulgences controversy, and how such differences have been, or may be, resolved.

Other irritating points stand out as demanding a response, impossible in the space of this review. One particular irritation is the treatment of the question of merit. The Statement's assertion of the unmerited nature of justification (§24) avoids the contentious issue of a congruously meritorious disposition towards justification – a concept particularly associated with Franciscan theologians, and

generally rejected by their Dominican counterparts, but which is clearly permitted by the Council of Trent. The concept of 'congruous merit' (ie, merit in a weak sense of the term) has always been regarded as offensive by Protestants. The Statement makes no reference to the concept, despite its highly contentious nature – perhaps a reflection of the curious absence of Franciscans from the Roman Catholic contingent. Perhaps the Commission might like to clarify its assertion that justification is 'a totally unmerited gift' (§24): is it saying that justification cannot be merited *congruously?* If so, there will be questions asked concerning whether the Roman Catholic side is in any sense representative of Roman Catholicism and the Council of Trent; if not, the Statement is perhaps slightly misleading, to say the least.

It is instructive to compare *Justification by Faith* and *Salvation in the Church* at this point. *Justification by Faith* is a lengthy and scholarly document, dealing at length and convincingly with the historical and theological questions raised by the doctrine at the time of the Reformation. Points of convergence are noted, as are points of divergence. No attempt is made to fudge issues; instead, we find the genuine differences between Lutherans and Roman Catholics being faced fairly and squarely, with real attempts to assess how significant they are on the basis of the best exegetical and historical research. *Salvation in the Church,* however, gives the impression of being an exercise in ecclesiastical diplomacy rather than historical or theological argument. When the statement concludes that 'this is not an area where any remaining differences of theological interpretation or ecclesiological emphasis . . . can justify our continuing separation', even its most generous critic might have difficulty in avoiding the conclusion that this reflects its purely superficial engagement with many of the real questions at issue.

The present reviewer finds himself in the difficult position of believing that a degree of real and genuine agreement is possible between Protestants and Roman Catholics on a number of crucial points concerning the doctrine of justification, but being forced to admit that this document does little to support his belief. It is difficult to understand how so inadequate a document could result, when the Commission had before it the excellent report *Justification by Faith,* which effectively did all the hard work for it.

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Correction

Peter Forster points out that in his review of John Polkinghorne's *One World* (*Anvil* 3, 1986, p 298) he stated incorrectly that Dr Polkinghorne was the first Fellow of the Royal Society for over three hundred years to enter Anglican Orders. He is in fact the first Fellow for over *thirty* years.

Peter Williams